

THE EGYPTIAN OBELISK. USUALLY CALLED "CLEOPATRA'S NEEDLE."

WHEN ancient Rome was at the height of its power, it commenced plundering all the nations of the then civilized world. Long before the era of Augustus, the aristocracy of the Imperial and Eternal City had appropriated to themselves all that was valuable in Italy, Sicily, Africa, Greece. Whatever they could carry away they took: where this could not be accomplished, fire and demolition came to their aid. They were men of the sword, rapacious, unprincipled; elevated above all ordinary feelings and amiable weaknesses of human nature. Their desire to possess the noble monuments of Grecian art was not the result of any inherent taste or tone of art, but simply of a rapacious nature, desirous of becoming masters by violence, by the sword, of objects whose value they knew by their price in the money-market of the world. Should any of your readers doubt this, I beg to refer them to Cicero's Letters, in which they will find the character of the Roman aristocracy drawn unwittingly by a master hand.

This policy, as it was called, of enriching Rome, then cosmopolitan, at the expense of other nations, was continued by Augustus and his successors. Regardless of the heterogeneity of objects—beautiful and sublime when permitted to remain on the soil which gave them, if I may so say, birth, or, at least, existence—the arch-hypocrite continued to embellish Rome at the expense of the world.

Amongst other objects of plunder which he transferred to Italy and to Rome, was an Egyptian obelisk. It is now in Rome, with some others, the result of the continued plunder of Egypt, reduced to a province. Not having seen the Roman (?) obelisk, I cannot, of course, venture to speak of the figure it makes amidst the monuments of Grecian and Italian architecture,—of Greco-Italian, and of the architecture, partly Saracenic, partly Gothic, florid and simple, chaste and superfluously gaudy, which the various races, conquerors of Italy, bequeathed to the still conquered and depressed race of that unhappy country. How these spoiliations transferred to Rome look, amidst the heterogeneous architectural mass,—I pretend not to conjecture; but I have seen, the obelisk lately transported from Egypt to France, and now standing erect in Paris,—Paris, the capital of La Belle France,—the centre of taste and fashion,—the star of the civilized world;—and with your permission, I shall offer a few remarks respecting it, the Parisian obelisk, applicable, I think, to the proposal now on foot to erect somewhere in London an Egyptian obelisk.

When it was resolved in France that an obelisk, presented to the nation by one of the blood-thirsty savage rulers of Egypt, should be transported to France, and, of course, to Paris, which is France, men of taste, and they abound in France, were at first puzzled where to place it. It was in their estimation easy enough to transport it to Paris: there is abundance of mechanical ability in the world; but this was not the difficulty with this artistic race,—it was the question of position. After much consideration, and the drawing of numerous plans, sketches, and views, they decided on erecting it on perhaps the least objectionable *localité* which Paris afforded, on ground beautifully disposed, at a sufficient distance from other buildings which might, by their size or character, overshadow the gracefully tapering and elegant form of the obelisk, or mar and render ludicrous its antique classic and oriental character when contrasted with the gaudy, flaring, jaunty beauties of modern Paris. Still the result, admitted by the Parisians themselves, was not successful.

The impression made on my mind on a first and second view of the obelisk of Paris, I found to be in accordance with that of every man of taste I conversed with. Dislocated from the soil on which it was erected, from the glorious sunshine in which it basked on the Egyptian plain, from the shores of the Nile, from Thebes, from Gezeh and the Libyan Desert, it resembled the petrified mummy of a race no longer existing, of a genius which had passed

away—an emblem of another world. And so it is of an Eastern or African world,—that is, mind, with which neither Gaul nor Saxon have a spark of consanguinity: all is heterogeneous (I had almost said ludicrous), for from the sublime to the ridiculous there is but a step.

Around the obelisk flits the gay, busy, trifling mob of Paris. They look at it and wonder what it means. They have some recollections of Egypt, it is true, and that their great emperor was once there. That is all: the rest had better be forgotten. The *Grand Ouvrage sur l'Egypte* is a much nobler memento of their expedition. No military trophies (supposing them appropriate in this case), can be compared with this. The French expedition to Egypt produced the *grand ouvrage sur l'Egypte*, and nothing more: the English descent on the land of the Pharaohs led to the capture of the trilingual stone of Rosetta and the dislodgment of the French: that is all. Egypt remains precisely where it was,—barbarous, savage, uncivilized. Neither Roman, nor French, nor English interference has ameliorated her lot; a fact which historians will relate without the aid of any obelisks, however obtained.

Should any one ask me then why the French transported an Egyptian obelisk to Paris, I should feel at a loss to answer him, and I am sure that the Parisians themselves would be equally at a loss. It is no embellishment to their modern city, the representative of Celtic taste; its very form and meaning incomprehensible to the Celtic and European mind. It cannot be intended to mark by it that they were once in Egypt: history will secure this recollection, and also the fact that Menon surrendered the country, and with it the black stone of Rosetta, to an English force. Why, then, erect a pyramid or obelisk on the soil of France? If by doing so you think to immortalize the greatest of men who led you there, I beseech you, in the name of common sense, to give it up. The name of Napoleon will be fresh in the memories of men when your race and nation have vanished from the earth.

And now, having endeavoured at least to show the false step committed by the French people in erecting an obelisk in their capital, I am prepared to hear some one say, What would you propose doing with it? how would you dispose of it? These questions bear directly on the proposed removal of the Egyptian obelisk to London. Let me speak first of the Parisian one.

There can only be two modes proposed of disposing of the Parisian obelisk. The first is, to send it back to Egypt, and with a solemn request to the present cut-throat Government, that, in consideration that mankind has a history, that they are not mere beasts, and, above all, that in the history of Egypt is deeply involved the history of civilization and of the human race, the rulers of the valley of the Nile will at least protect those monuments they never did nor ever will comprehend.

The next best mode of disposing of the Parisian obelisk is, to transport it to the shores of the Mediterranean, and there, on the lonely sea-beach, apart from all other objects, raise up that obelisk as near as may be to the spot on which stood, prior to the embarkation for Egypt, the mighty Napoleon.

The Egyptian expedition was a comparatively profitable one to England, and therefore, and more especially since the French have got their obelisk, the English have resolved to have theirs. But, supposing the obelisk fairly transported to London, and safely deposited near Westminster or London-bridge, have you thought of where it is to be placed? Where will you erect this emblem of the Coptic mind? of the dreamy race who imagined and built Carnak, and the Pyramids, and the Memnonium? remains of a race to which you and your buildings—your big glass house, and your big nunnery at Westminster-bridge—your eternal common-place—your model houses and model churches are wholly antagonistic? Will you erect this mighty shadow of the remote past in Trafalgar-square?—or in the park?—or in the Tower?—or at Wapping Old Stairs? Or will you turn it to account, as is your nature, and set it somewhere where it may be

useful?—place a gaslamp on its summit, erase some of the hieroglyphics to make room for the letters V. and A., and the name of the then Lord Mayor? From what you have already done none of these steps would surprise me or any other person who had lived some time in London.

As with the Parisian obelisk, so it is with the one which England purposes bringing from Egypt. There are two ways of disposing of it: the first is, to leave it in Egypt, urging on the ruler of the country to respect the remains of antiquity: but should it be brought to England, avoid London, that heterogeneous mass of attempts at all the architecture of the earth: avoid placing this graceful and beautiful object in contact with a race who understand it not; to whom it is not merely foreign in the ordinary sense of the term, but wholly antagonistic to their mental characteristics. Do not allow men's ears to be afflicted with the painful question of the Saxon utilitarian, what is the use of it? how much did it cost?—it is not so high as St. Paul's, and nothing like the Duke of York's monument in thickness. Spare us these dreadful questions, which are sure to be asked daily by thousands of London's educated and polished people. This you may easily do. The obelisk can have with the British mind but one association—NELSON. Sweep from the beach of Southsea those dreadful-looking figures to which I alluded in my last letter to you,* and erect in their stead, close to the entrance of your great naval harbour, this obelisk, raised on a base or pedestal of Egyptian granite corresponding to that on which it once stood. Erect it, at least, in sight of that harbour from which sailed the armament on whose success depended your existence as a nation; and as near as may be to the spot where embarked the man on whom your fate depended. Be for once dignified. Forget the "Gallic cock!" consign him, with the "British grenadier," to the pot-house frequenter. Leave gasconading and bravadoes to your younger brethren, on the other side of the Atlantic: even they will become ashamed of this, with time. And should any one inquire of you what brings this obelisk here, standing alone upon this lonely beach, you may point to the letter N cut deeply on its granite basement.

AMERICAN ART AND ARCHITECTURE.

The Astor Library.—We learn from the *New York Journal of Commerce*, that the building for the Astor Library is now being plastered, and will be ready for occupation in the course of next spring. Its dimensions are 65 feet front and 120 deep, and it covers the whole lot. It is 70 feet high, and is built of brick, with a basement faced with brown stone, and is without pretension in its architecture. The building is to cost, including the ground, 100,000 dollars, one-fourth of the sum applied by Mr. Astor to the whole object. The rear of the building is devoted to the purposes of a lecture-room, and its walls are lower than those of the main structure, so that light and air are admitted from the front and rear, and also from the top, into the library room, which constitutes nearly the whole of the interior of the main structure. The floor of this room is elevated about 20 feet from the ground, and is ascended by means of a wide stone staircase, which rises from the vestibule of the building, and terminates in the centre of the library. Having reached this point in the large room, one stands immediately under the dome, which lets down a flood of light on the main floor, and on the gallery situated midway between it and the roof. From the presence of frequent light columns reaching from the main floor to the dome, and supporting partially the gallery, it would seem that the shelves for books are to reach from these columns to the wall, at right angles to the wall, and thus form alcoves on each floor, opening towards the light and closed on three sides, in which a person consulting the books may ensconce himself. The feature about the building most to be commended, considering the uses to which it is to

* See p. 798, ante.